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40,001 Pages From FBI Files

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Jack Ruby, right, shoots Lee Harvey Oswald as Oswald is being transferred to county jail.

Infighting, but Little New Evidence

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The FBI yesterday made public thousands of new documents that reveal intense backstage infighting over the conduct of the investigation into President Kennedy's assassination, but apparently no significant new evidence about the murder.

The records, released under the Freedom of Information Act, provide an unprecedented glimpse of the biggest and most painstaking criminal manhunt in FBI history.

They also reveal the degree to which President Kennedy's murder tapped national currents of paranoia as well as racial and political hostility that sent the bureau's agents chasing after informants, suspects and mental patients with equal zeal.

The FBI's investigators spent days tracking down one woman from Panama City, Fla., who reportedly overheard two men plotting the murder in a bus only to find from her doctor that she was a "neurotic . . . a pathological liar who seeks to attract attention."

By the same token, the documents reviewed yesterday suggested that the FBI never seriously entertained the possibility that the shots directed at Kennedy came from anywhere but behind him.

See DOCUMENTS, A12, Col. 4

DOCUMENTS, From A1

The bureau at times seemed more interested in investigating the motives and affiliations of its critics than in pursuing the contradictions offered by the evidence at the scene of the crime.

Just three days after the assassination, high-ranking FBI officials were already reflecting in their internal correspondence on the frustrations confronting them as they sought to check out what they believed to be a negative proposition—that a foreign conspiracy did not exist.

"We are being called upon, in many instances, to prove the negative," Courtney Evans, a high-ranking aide to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, wrote in a memo following a telephone conversation with Deputy Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach. "Katzenbach notes it is more difficult to prove that something did not happen than it is to prove that it did happen."

The 40,001 pages released yesterday —which will be followed by another 40,000 pages of JFK assassination documents to be disgorged next month — also detail the degree to which the FBI sought to manipulate the news media during the long inquiry, appealing to those it considered "friendly" and complaining of those who questioned its methods.

At one point early in the investigation, about three weeks after the President was killed in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Hoover did profess far greater misgivings that he ever publicly acknowledged about the possibility that others besides Lee Harvey Oswald have been involved.

Recounting a conversation he had just had with Warren Commission general counsel Lee Rankin on Dec. 12, 1963, Hoover said in a four-page memo that morning that "I personally believe Oswald was the assassin, but the second aspect as to whether he was the only one gives me great concern."

But it remained unclear whether the FBI director was voicing this fear simply for the record or whether he was really troubled by it. As evidence of his apprehensions, he said he told Rankin of "several letters" written to Oswald from Cuba "referring to the job he was going to do."

In another memo written that day, Dec. 12, 1963, Hoover dwelt on the suspicious nature of those letters, noted that they had been written on the same typewriter although ostensibly signed by different individuals, and concluded that they were apparently "an attempted hoax." There is no evidence that Hoover shared his doubts with Rankin.

The massive discharge of documents is a result of the bureau's "Project Onslaught," a $2.8 million effort to reduce its huge backlog of freedom-of-information requests. FBI officials said the release of the Kennedy papers alone will cost, by conservative estimate, at least $138,000.

Many of the papers released yesterday had been previously made public before, but these were reissued together with the new documents without any distinction. Uncounted pages bearing on the Kennedy assassination in key FBI field offices such as Dallas and New Orleans are still locked up. The files being released under Project Onslaught consist solely of FBI headquarters documents under three headings: the JFK assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby.

Another memo from Evans to Hoover aide Alan Belmont repeated not only Katzenbach's concern for a speedy report on the FBI's findings, but reflected mounting worries about press speculation about a conspiracy.

Oswald's Motives

One of the dangers Katzenbach cited, according to this memo, was that an inquiry by state officials in Texas would delve into the sensitive area of Oswald's motives.

"One of the dangers which Katzenbach sees is the possibility that the state hearing . . . may develop some pertinent information not now known," Evans wrote.

In an effort to minimize that danger, he said, he dispatched a Justice Department official to talk with Texas officials "to have them restrict their hearing to the proposition of showing merely that Oswald killed the President . . . He hopes to avoid the state hearing going into the question of motive or trying to resolve the communist angle."

The same memo revealed that Katzenbach had learned, "on an extremely confidential basis," that Washington attorney Abe Fortas, a confidant of President Johnson, had talked with Johnson and argued against the idea of having a presidential commission look into the assassination.

Fortas' argument, according to Evans, was that even to announce such a commission would suggest there was more to the assassination than one man acting alone, and that it would also call into question the effectiveness of the FBI.

"Fortas, of course, is no friend of the bureau and there would appear to be some obvious underhanded motive in his using us in his argument, although we don't know what this is," the Hoover aide said.

The Evans remark ran counter to a widespread assumption that Fortas was a principal advocate of the creation of the Warren Commission.

Signs of internal rivalry and occasional bickering among the highest levels of the assassination probe began to develop just a few weeks after the President was slain.

For instance, on Dec. 2, Katzenbach telephoned Evans, according to a memorandum of conversation, and said that Chief Justice Earl Warren was "strongly opposing" any publication of the still incomplete FBI report on the assassination. Warren felt so strongly about it, Katzenbach is quoted as saying, that he would resign from the commission if anything was released.

The memo went on to say that Katzenbach also regarded Warren Olney, who was being considered as chief counsel to the commission, as "undesirable" for the post. His reasons were not spelled out.

The next day, "Cartha (Deke) DeLoach, assistant FBI director, reported in a memo that Katzenbach had called him and said he believed that Olney had "definitely been dumped," and that he had given the go-ahead for the appointment of Lee Rankin as general counsel.

Trouble Over Release

Occasionally testy discussions also developed at the Justice Department and the White House over the form of a press release that was to be issued concerning the investigation.

According to a Dec. 9 DeLoach memo, Hoover felt "strongly" that only the first paragraph of a proposed press release—asserting blandly that an FBI report had been transmitted to the commission — should be released.

However, Katzenbach is quoted as saying there was a "stalemate" at the White House in connection with the release, with Fortas arguing that the entire release should be issued.

Fortas' argument, DeLoach wrote, was that "speculation, rumors and gossip should be dispelled right now."

"He claimed that it made no difference that the presidential commission would present findings to the President and the general public. He felt rumors concerning collusion between Ruby and Oswald, also concerning international conspiracy, should be hit hard now," DeLoach wrote.

No Press Release

As a result of the bickering, he said, there would be no press release. Instead, Katzenbach was to write a letter to Warren and each commission member appealing for a quick report so that rumors and speculation could be eliminated.

Referring to Katzenbach's letter, DeLoach said, "He goes on to point out that [the] investigation thus far has nailed down the point that Oswald assassinated the President and had no assistance. He further mentions that Ruby operated strictly as an "individual and had no assistance. He points out that there is no evidence of collusion or international intrigue."

Interestingly, the suppressed press release did not seem worthy of so much bureaucratic anguish.

It merely stated that an FBI report had been sent to the commission, and that the Justice Department was of the opinion that scientific examination of evidence had established that Oswald shot Kennedy. It also said

that no evidence had been uncovered to date of a conspiracy involving any persons, including Jack Ruby, but that this aspect of the probe would be investigated further.

The letters Hoover cited to Rankin as potential indicators of a conspiracy pointing toward Cuban Premier Fidel Castro concerned a so-called Pedro or Peter Charles. Hoover said he told Rankin that they alluded to Oswald's "good marksmanship" and stated "when it was all over, he [Oswald] would be brought back to Cuba and presented to the chief." Hoover said it was not certain that "the chief" was Castro, but suggested that the letters were sufficient reason for his strongly urging Rankin at that point in the inquiry "that we not reach conclusion Oswald was the only man."

Despite all that, the FBI laboratory had by then made a thorough examination of the Charles letter, which was dated Nov. 10, 1963, but not postmarked in Havana until Nov. 25, 1963, and compared it with another letter, also postmarked in Havana on Nov. 28, 1963, and addressed to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

The first letter, from Charles to "Friend Lee," was intercepted in Dallas Dec. 5, 1963, and was not, in itself, a new disclosure. It was written in such a way as to suggest that Oswald had been paid off by Charles in Miami to carry out an unspecified mission that involved accurate shooting.

The other letter, dated Nov. 27, 1963, and adressed to Robert Kennedy by someone calling himself "Mario de Rosario Molina," asserted that Oswald had killed the President at the direction of Pedro Charles, a Castro agent who was supposed to have met Oswald in Miami some two months earlier and paid him $7,000.

The FBI's Intelligence Division reported on Dec. 11, 1963, however, that both letters had been written on the same Remington typewriter, that the same type pen and ink had been used to sign both letters, and that the two postmarks contained the same irregularities.

'Attempted Hoax'

"[It] seems clear that this matter represents an attempted hoax, possibly perpetrated by some anti-Castro group seeking to attach blame to the Castro government," the FBI's W. R. Wannall informed his boss in the Intelligence Division, William C. Sullivan.

Hoover indicated the next day, in one of the newly disclosed memos, that he agreed, saying that "it appears this matter represents an attempted hoax," especially in view of the delayed mailing, but adding that the CIA and State Department had been asked to be alert for any signs that Molina might try to get to Venezuela as his Nov. 27 letter had stated.

There was no indication in the documents reviewed yesterday that he ever did.

Rich in detail, the documents portray a thoroughness which seems to transcend even the FBI's reputation for attention to detail. No matter how obscure or ambiguous, each lead was tracked down with personal interviews, tireless background checks and a seeming obsession for completeness.

The Warren Commission encouraged such thoroughness, as Rankin wrote increasing numbers of letters to the FBI telling it about new tips received or claims of overheard conversations.

At one point, FBI officials seemed to show minor annoyance with what the commission was forwarding to the bureau.

"From general appearances of this communication, it would appear the correspondent has little, if any, information . . . and might also be a mental case," the FBI said of one letter-writer. "However, in view of the commission's request, it is not felt we have any alternative but to handle the request," the memo added.

Total Checking-Out

No matter who was brought to the bureau's attention—or no matter for what purpose—the subject would be checked out. Somebody at American Broadcasting Co. sent Hoover a complimentary record album with key broadcasts about the Dallas tragedy, and enclosed a form letter saying it was from ABC-Paramount Theaters President Leonard H. Goldenson. Hoover wrote a cordial letter of thanks, to which a bureau official attached the note, "Bufiles [bureau files] contain no derogatory information regarding Mr. Goldenson."

According to the records, the FBI expended thousands of man-hours tracking down other false leads and hoaxes, but the bureau was apparently determined to leave no trivia unturned. It even undertook to investigate an article in Fairchild Publications' Home Furnishings Daily which ominously reported, under a Dallas dateline, that "warehouse sales are becoming a red-hot weapon in the retailer arsenal."